

Graduate Report
The Impact of Transparency in International Climate Issues

Under the direction of

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The Symposium took place during the week of the UN Climate Change Conference and therefore has its label. It included a number of presentations on the topics such as open data and climate change, improving climate change policies, funding disclosure policies and information standards, transparency and opacity, equality and access to environmental information, water quality and open information, citizens' participation, sustainable food policies, as well as environmental compliance and non-state actors participation.



Ice blocks in front of the Panthéon,
representing the glaciers

I presented the last topic, entitled “*Non-State Actors and Compliance with EU Law: the Case of the EIA Directive in Latvia.*” The paper was based on a portion of my thesis dealing with the broader issues of environmental compliance and NGO impact thereon, as well as various conditions under which such impact is likely to be greater, but allocating a greater scope to public and citizens' participation, and how it is likely to be enabled.

The understanding of what factors and conditions facilitate or impede compliance is of significance. Without compliance, even the most ambitious policies tend to remain ineffective. The importance of the role of informal and non-state actors, such as NGOs, industry actors, and the general public, is increasingly evident in current and recent research. To analyze the above, I used the example of the EU Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) directive, and looked at how it is complied with in Latvia. The choice of the directive is not accidental: it includes important provisions of the Aarhus convention stipulating the right of the public to have access to environmental information, to be able to participate in environmental decision-making, and to have access to justice in case of environmental non-

compliance.

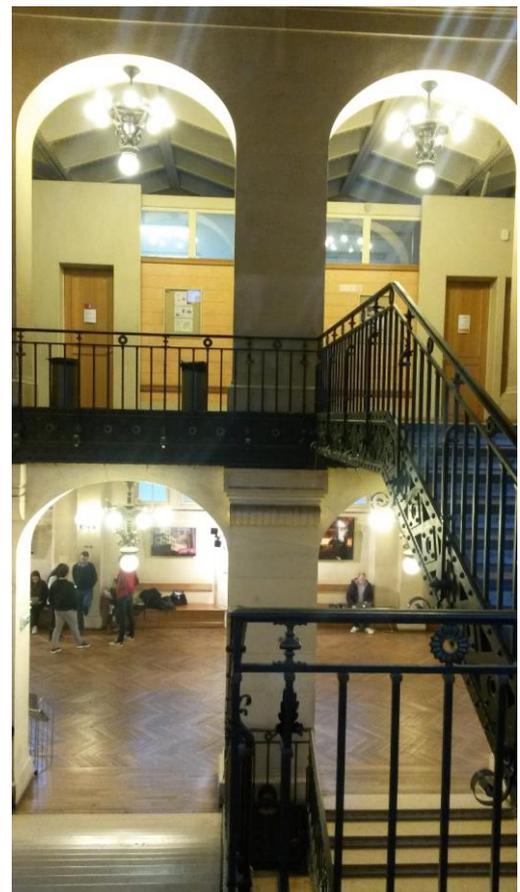
I defined compliance policy-consistent behaviour, and looked at it in two stages: firstly, the legal transposition of the EU EIA directive into Latvian legislation; and secondly,

the practical application of these policies by the target actors (such as various businesses and industries). Latvia turns out to be one of the best compliers in the EU when it comes to legal transposition. The picture is less clear with regard to practical application. Most actors, especially large companies with projects at least partially funded by international bodies including the EU, complied very well. However, companies that have no such stake, and especially small companies which are more difficult to track, exhibited a less successful record and even had some violations.

Latvia is a “new” member-state, having acceded to the EU in 2004. Its environmental NGO sector is still rather underdeveloped. Democratization and EU membership opened many doors to greater NGO growth, although the sector suffers from lack of resources, especially financial ones. Nevertheless, a few key environmental NGOs were found to contribute to compliance with the EIA and the Aarhus provisions, by disseminating essential information and assisting with public participation in the EIA-relevant industrial and related projects. However, while the public is substantially more ‘enabled’ to participate, such participation has not always been found effective. The main reasons for such ineffectiveness have been lack of resources; poor incentives for the public to participate; being inundated in highly technical information; lack of interest on behalf of the public; and, most of all, lack of the relevant knowledge and basic environmental education to determine whether a particular project may or may not be harmful to environment. Policy recommendations thus include substantially increasing environmental education in public schools and allocating funding and other resources to environmental NGOs.

Another interesting study that caught my attention was a presentation by Eleanor MITCH on access to environmental information on water quality in Brazil. I was struck by the difference in the level of public concern and participation in environmental matters in the case of Rio de Janeiro’s Guanabara Bay and Lagoa. The local public in question has been much more local, outspoken, active, and effective in addressing the pollution issue than in the vast majority of Latvian cases. The most apparent reason stems from the fact that in Latvia, the possible or potential environmental damage does not touch or directly affect people’s lives, whereas in Rio de Janeiro it very much does. People who rely on a clean and healthy environment for fishing needs will lose their incomes and livelihoods when the fish die from the damage. When environmental matters touch people’s lives directly, it naturally creates a strong incentive to address the issue, compared to when environmental damage is peripheral and affects ecosystems without a direct impact on the people.

Another interesting was on transparency of labelling in food safety and sustainability. Food is a sector affecting both the public and the environment in very direct ways. Unsustainable food practices such as the use of certain chemicals, unsustainable agriculture, or intensive animal rearing



Inside the Sorbonne 1 – Panthéon building

installations, all contribute to pollution, soil depletion, and a higher carbon footprint accelerating climate change. While a number of powerful businesses and industries may resist clear and transparent labelling, the public as consumers has the power to “vote” when purchasing certain foods. The public can also demand a more transparent labelling system.

As mentioned, this Sorbonne Symposium took place during the COP21 negotiations. The results of these negotiations seem to be more successful those of a number of preceding climate change talks. The leaders have agreed to set a target for emissions cuts, and agreed to keep average temperature increases below 2 degrees Celsius, with some even more ambitious goals to keep it down to 1.5 degrees above the pre-industrial levels. On the surface, it looks like a great success; politicians were very excited, and the media seemed to have picked up that excitement.

However, despite the agreement and the increasing emphasis on clean energy technology, a significant number of countries (particularly in Asia) are not planning to decarbonize and continue building power plants. Moreover, an important shortcoming of the deal is the insufficiency of binding compliance mechanisms (at least when it comes to emission targets, not just the process). Both governments and the private sector (industries and corporations) should be legally bound to abide by the new provisions.

This ties directly to my own research topic on the importance of *complying* with environmental policies. Therefore, it is difficult to be confident about the effectiveness of policies that may in the end turn out to be “toothless”.

As for the general Paris mood, I found it not much different from the usual, despite just a few weeks following the November terrorist attacks. The city appeared to live and thrive and move on to its usual self. Airport security was minimal, and not excessive otherwise. The only noticeable change was security guards checking people’s bags in a number of public buildings which included several of the Sorbonne buildings, city hall, and the like. Alas, some travellers were over-cautious, and a number of US participants had cancelled their participation, fearful of security threats. However, such caution was clearly unnecessary.

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